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# Active Spectatorship

## Spiritual Dimensions of Film

*Sharon Swenson*

**M**enacing music signals something ominous. My three-year-old grandson, Gavin, looks up at me, and we hug each other closer under the quilt, shivering in anticipation. In the background is . . . *something* . . . and it's getting closer and closer. What seemed like something small and close by is really something large and far away and getting closer by the second. Squeeze tighter; Gavin glances up at me and giggles, but I remain serious and calm, preparing for whatever might come. It's a whale! Zooming toward us!

We're watching *Finding Nemo* (2003), and in their efforts to find Nemo, Dory and Marlin have encountered a mammoth mammal—and Dory has even asked him for help. Gavin and I snuggle deeper into the recliner, ready to see what this tiny blue fish and white-striped orange clownfish will do next. Our anxiety is justified; the whale looms up, gathering Dory and Marlin in a mouthful of krill. They float down his gullet, past his gigantic teeth. Marlin struggles to hang on, to stay where he is. Dory encourages Marlin, seeing it as one more adventure. “Just keep swimming,” she says. Will her trust be repaid? Finally, after Marlin releases his anxiety and control and just floats with Dory inside the whale, the two little fish are shot straight into the air through the whale's spout. The whale has moved them closer to their goal. But Marlin will have to relearn the lesson that he has to let go—and so will I, I reflect as I pull Gavin nearer to me.

~

It's early evening and I'm walking from my university office to the parking lot. I'm carrying three bags—my purse; my briefcase with laptop; and another bag of papers that need to be read and graded, administrative documents that need to be dealt with, and scholarly materials that need to

be reviewed. I'm weighted down, not just by the physical burdens but by the obligations they represent. And then there's finalizing the Gospel Doctrine lesson for Sunday morning. And planning meals and buying groceries. As I trudge along, tired, suddenly I hear Dory saying, "Just keep swimming, swimming, swimming. I looove to swim." And then I smile and remember that I've chosen to do all this work and to care for people I love and that the weekend also includes Gavin sleeping over and the Saturday morning ritual of a pancake breakfast and grocery shopping with "Unca Johnny." I'm grateful for what I've learned from a fictional blue fish named Dory, which is intertwined with other nurturing and challenging material I use in my efforts to continue to grow spiritually.

~

My understanding of how God works in our lives is expanded and clarified through film—watching, teaching, reflecting on, and talking about film in a variety of circumstances. The power of image-driven story can be a useful tool to provide additional ways we consider our spiritual nature; personally, my experience of films has increasingly become useful in understanding myself and others, particularly in spiritual dimensions. My understanding of how God works in our lives, especially in my own, is expanded and clarified through film—watching, teaching, reflecting on, and talking about film. I believe it can be a useful tool that provides new ways to consider our spiritual nature, strengths *and* weaknesses, particularly in our ways of relating to others.

### **Why Study Film as a Spiritual Guide?**

We may find it hard to take film seriously and relate film to spirituality, particularly if most of our experience has been that film watching is something we do in our leisure time or something we don't participate in much. Or we may be concerned about film's spiritual impact because so many films can be harmful to our souls. If film is something pushed to the edges of our inner life as a respite from thinking, or if we dismiss it largely due to its worldly character and common misuses, we may feel uncomfortable contemplating film in this manner. "This is not what we do with movies," we may say. It's possible that we may take film as a serious part of our spirituality only if we feel a movie threatens our values, or we may doubt that something often perceived primarily as a diversion could have deep meaning for us.

But my film studies colleagues and students and I believe in the capacity of film to help transform people's lives for the better. We are not seeking knowledge about films per se; we are seeking to know what our perceptions

and responses to film tell us about our spiritual nature. Being viewers of film and taking that spectatorship (how we engage with the screen's images) seriously is part of our spiritual lives; it can be a positive way of expanding our self-awareness and spiritual growth. Thus this process of viewing film is not primarily about film—it's about ourselves, especially the parts of ourselves we have the hardest time seeing, the places we need to fix or attend to. It's about seeing the parts of ourselves that others might easily recognize but that are hard for us to get a clear fix on. Film can offer insights, training experiences, vicarious knowledge, and an acting out of others' life experience and "soul states" that may help us develop spiritually.

Reflecting on what happens to me as I watch films—in conjunction with my personal scripture study, prayer, journal writing, and contemplation of what the Lord would have me do—allows me to see the ways I need to change and can change. Because of the way film is constructed and operates, we can use it to understand important things about ourselves and others. In academia, there are useful concepts about how film influences spectators, but their framing in scholarly discourse limits the accessibility of such concepts. Drawing on that academic background and my own inner uses of films, I have identified several dimensions of experiencing films that demonstrate the depth of meaning possible from spiritual engagement with film. These dimensions function in the repeated experiences of watching and reflecting about ordinary films like *Finding Nemo*.

We watch and reflect on films using our knowledge as perceptive beings with moral agency and insight. These meditations can be a powerful tool to deepen our efforts to know ourselves, others, and the Lord. My experiences with *Finding Nemo* can demonstrate this use of film for spiritual development, including some related aspects of film theory. Although I study film as a profession and view it for pleasure, *Finding Nemo* is a film that mattered to me initially because it was something that I shared with my grandson. It is a mainstream animated film that I brought home because I thought Gavin might like it. And he did—we both did. We watch it frequently, together, sitting under a blanket in our favorite chair. The personal context of viewing is important here: Gavin and I watch *Finding Nemo* over and over. It's one of the many things we enjoy doing together, and I have learned from it.

The film, directed by Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich, focuses on a clownfish (Nemo) who is stolen from his coral reef home by a diver who is a dentist in Sydney, Australia. Nemo's father, Marlin, is timid and overprotective of his son, just like a grandmother can often be. The film's actions are the parallel encounters Nemo and Marlin have as they struggle

to reunite. In the course of this plot, both learn to trust others to help them and to trust themselves.

### Film Watching Is Both Personal and Communal

Film watching is one of the most common and yet least acknowledged forms of sharing in contemporary culture: we share the act of having viewed many of the same films, the knowledge of popular movie quotes such as “Make my day,” and the experience of a common action of living vicariously. Culturally, we most often watch film as part of a group, whether in a theater or at home, but we respond as much privately as we do publicly. It is important to acknowledge and come to terms with this duality. At times, it seems that the film exists only “out there,” on the screen and in that original viewing experience. But a film is more than what happens while we are watching it together: the internal, personal consequences of viewing are important even if unacknowledged.

In our viewings of *Finding Nemo*, there are no real surprises but many expected and repeated pleasures. Gavin and I see the film together, but each of us has a personal experience, as well as the shared one. Part of my experience is watching him respond and sharing the ritual responses of anxiety, relief, and laughter with him. I delight in his pleasure. I see the film partly through his eyes and partly through the lens of my own childhood and that of my children.

### The Form and Style of Film Affect Its Spiritual Dimensions

What happens to us spiritually when we watch a film? Scholars have acknowledged the social force of film to shape cultural identity but have said little about spirituality and film specifically. Before his career as a screenwriter and director, Paul Schrader described a process he felt could lead film viewers to a metaphysical experience. The primary force in generating this experience was form, rather than content. He emphasizes it is “film style” and not subject matter that creates a viewer’s transcendent spiritual experience through film.<sup>1</sup> Thomas Lefler and Gideon Burton do an excellent job of describing and applying Schrader’s Transcendental style to Mormonism in a case study of the LDS Church’s *Legacy*, summarized in this issue of *BYU Studies*.<sup>2</sup> They clearly identify the role of theology in the kind of transcendence possible for the spectator of *Legacy*.

Schrader’s work calls attention to the *process*, or form, of film, rather than its plot, or *content*. He emphasizes one dimension of considering how a film can work on us—how we work with a film, as well as what the film is about. He suggests that we carefully consider the way a film moves us

through a narrative, as well as the narrative itself.<sup>3</sup> Thus, as I watch *Finding Nemo*, I must consider not just the narrative events, such as when Marlin and Dory escape from sharks, but how this scene fits into the bigger picture of how the film is working and the ways it encourages me to interact. How do I follow Marlin and Nemo? The form of *Finding Nemo* moves me as smoothly and buoyantly as a fish swims through a coral reef. Am I moved so quickly through the narrative that I lose myself in the fast-paced action? Do the characters disappear beneath overwhelming spectacle? In some films, we find that the mode of the film's presentation of information can subvert the apparent intent of the content. Conventional filmmaking, whatever its subject and moral message, may give the story to us in an emotionally driven form, a sensationalistic ride through artificially pumped-up or manipulated emotions. Being led through shallow sentiment may conceal deeper, darker implications. A form that is shaped around easy solutions and quickly provoked emotions such as anger, blame, and pity may cheapen even the most worthwhile content. When we are caught up with a group in the moment of watching a film, we may simply accept and even justify decisions that rest on little more than easily evoked sentiments. The form of a film that includes manipulative music or use of lighting or opportunistic plot points can lead to simplistic results that the work (and we as viewers) may not warrant. When we are scrutinizing the content of films, we should also consider *how* they tell their worthy stories.

Family or children's films are particularly prone to avoid complexities or to use the appeal of emotion or inane "comic relief" in their form, whatever their narrative content. But *Finding Nemo* presents a heart-tugging situation while resisting the temptation to provide easy solutions; it is artfully crafted, with repeated patterns of learning and problem solving; all advances toward a happy ending are earned by the work of the characters; the storyteller does not cheat by finding simplistic solutions. The film does not efface the difficulties of what the characters are doing. I share the work Marlin and Nemo do to find each other as they earn their rewards. The film successfully balances showing real difficulties with showing faith that difficulties can be changed.

### **We Co-create Meanings in Film**

The film experience consists not only of our watching the film but of later reflecting on it personally and discussing it with others, in various contexts. It is in contemplating the experience of watching *Finding Nemo* that Dory's lines become integrated with my efforts to move forward, spiritually as well as physically. Watching the film with Gavin is part of

what makes this movie interesting to me—how many films can repeatedly engage a three-year-old and his grandmother? But when I regard what the film *means*, it comes alive for me in other settings and dimensions.

In watching a film, we co-create meanings with the filmmakers; we actively make our own personal meaning out of the film experience. One difficulty with film is that we may not be aware that we are doing anything but passively sitting. We watch *Nemo* and *Dory* surrounded and actively engaged by visual experience and the happenings around them, but our role in actively co-creating the meanings is invisible to us.

Sometimes when we watch a film we disappear into it, losing ourselves in the created world. (That is the primary reason some people go to movies—to immerse themselves in something quite different from daily life.) But it is impossible to go into a film and emerge with nothing more than “relaxation” or distraction from our other concerns. We carry with us the values and experiences we have helped create during that viewing.

I have noticed that while watching *Finding Nemo* I co-create some parts of the film because they link to something I continue to struggle with in my ongoing spiritual progress: being hindered in moving forward by my anxieties and fears, which is a limitation of my faith I struggle with. Bringing that concern—and earnest efforts to improve—to the film, I am especially sensitive to the ways that characters in the film learn to take risks and learn to trust themselves and each other. Marlin has to leave the safety of the reef and discover he can trust *Dory* and that he can ingeniously help other people, too. *Nemo* negotiates new situations by helping others and by using what he learns in new ways. *Dory* has to trust that she can read—and remember. Asking why I respond—and create the film for myself—in certain intense ways can let me tease out the connections to the spiritual work I’m doing to better myself.

Phenomenology is the study of things as they are perceived, acknowledging the existence of phenomena in the world but arguing they don’t “exist” for us until we perceive them. In literary and film studies, phenomenology generally points to the space where the book’s or film’s content and the viewer’s reception (or perception) of it meet. Meaning lies in a shared space held by the spectator who connects with his or her own values as well as those of the creator through the experience of the book or film. Meaning is not found in the text or content alone. It is created “on the run” while watching the film as the viewer receives from the creator the threads of meaning embedded in the film and revives it by his or her own energy and intelligence.<sup>4</sup>

Just as *Nemo* and *Marlin* are traversing new experiences and learning about themselves, so our viewing of them can cause us to take our

own phenomenological journey. My perception of Nemo and Marlin is inevitably shaped by my own experiences as a parent, particularly those with a son who has loved to explore and take risks since he was a toddler. This experiencing of a film—making sense of it—is fundamentally phenomenological, in the sense that it is our perception of the film that we experience and retain. The only meanings of a film we have are those that we perceive, that we help create through our participation, even though we may not be aware of it. The filmmakers have created the light and shadows and the story that is on the screen, but it is only our responses and our intelligence that allow the film to have meaning for us.

This phenomenological operation of film parallels the regular phenomenology of other spiritual practices. For instance, Christ's parables require a phenomenological response because the way they are presented requires our active participation (contemplation) to make them comprehensible and meaningful. Parables require us to understand what the story is about on the surface and then to actively determine what the hidden spiritual meanings are—and then to translate those into our lives. Religion requires us not only to directly watch or understand material intellectually and emotionally, but to reflect on what such material could mean to us in our personal struggles. We also practice a form of phenomenology as we read and reread scriptures or general conference addresses, seeing how our responses change as our life experiences allow us to see more deeply and differently. The same experience happens in church meetings when we consider the varying responses to lessons or church speakers from people who share a meeting with us: on some occasions certain people feel the spirit strongly, and sometimes others do. Every time we listen to a Gospel Doctrine lesson or sacrament meeting talk, we quickly, invisibly, and internally compare this new version or insight with what we already know or feel about it from prior experiences. We scan it against our prior interpretations or understandings, internalized and modified by repeated contemplations and exposures. We focus on what the scripture is saying to us now, how it is presented to us, what the motives and skills of the speaker or teacher are, and how what is being said is useful in our current efforts to improve. It is what we make of these messages that determines their spiritual efficacy in our lives.

As we actively co-create film, it calls us to ourselves. If I watch *Finding Nemo* without considering that I'm a creator of meaning, I might not learn what is possible about myself. Watching a film passively without awareness of our participation can mean that we only experience (and thus consider) events and people remotely, detached unless there is a visceral pull of sentiment or excitement. But the film process also means we can be



engaged empathetically with the characters and events on screen, and yet see them—and see ourselves experiencing them—from a distance.

Film scholar Vivian Sobchack values phenomenology as a way to “see” our personal seeing and begin to “know” the kinds of knowing we acquire as we view a film, as well as live life. It allows us vicarious experiences that expand our knowledge of others and can be used to deepen our understanding of ourselves: “Phenomenology calls us to a series of systematic reflections within which we question and clarify that which we intimately live, but which has been lost to our reflective knowledge through habituation and/or institutionalization.”<sup>55</sup> We become so accustomed to the way we perceive ourselves that we don’t think about *why* we see ourselves a certain way.

The power (and danger) of film is its ability to “show” us experiences and feelings from the inside, as if we were somehow seeing through the eyes and hearts of the characters on screen. Film can let us watch “ourselves” (on screen), then watch ourselves watching ourselves and others, then contemplate our responses. Sobchack says film “transposes,” or translates, the “invisible, individual,” internal, and personal privacy of our direct experience into a “visible, public” and shared “sociality of a language” that is spoken when we watch a film. The watching is powerful partly because it is embodied or embedded in a person and in a dramatic context: Sobchack says film is a form of “direct embodied experience.”<sup>56</sup>

Film condenses time and intensifies emotions. It lets us be simultaneously inside an experience on the screen and outside it reflecting on what we are doing and seeing. This means when I’m watching *Finding Nemo* I am Marlin and his son; I struggle to find independence as Nemo while I’m also Marlin endeavoring to protect his son. I can be Dory, too, trying to help my dear friend, and simultaneously be Marlin, filled with irritation at her flakiness. I can also see myself watching these characters and gain insight into how and why I look at film and at life. My viewing (and re-viewing of some films) can lead me to see certain patterns of feeling—like a knot in an otherwise smooth thread that calls attention to something I need to work on.

Thus, as viewers watching or remembering a film, we see in multiple levels: the characters from outside, the characters’ points of view from inside (emotionally and some times literally), the worldview created by the filmmaker, and—through reflection—we can see ourselves seeing. Understanding how we customarily view the world is important, but it is knowledge hard to come by. Film offers opportunities to get that knowledge. It can feel safe to first understand how we view the Nemo-Marlin relationship and other examples we see on the screen, but then we can turn to the

more complicated task of understanding how we view our own familial relationships. The act of constituting film requires active participation from creator and from viewer; the shared “visions” thus created are uniquely collective. But for us these visions depend on what we bring to its “making” through our active viewing.

### **Film Offers Meaningful Vicarious Experience**

Film’s vicarious experiences, which cover a broad range of lifestyles, are intensified by their presentation in a dramatic form. Film can offer training experiences, a way of acting out others’ life experience and soul states that may give us insight, from the inside out. And since the experience is provisional, we gain understanding while fully inhabiting it (for good or ill). Viewers actively engage with the vicarious experiences a film offers, satisfying a desire for conflict and resolution, for endangerment as well as reassurance or joy. For example, we feel physical tension and then relief when Marlin saves Dory from the jellyfish. Not only are they (as am I) safe, but Marlin (and I) have overcome our fear of danger and ingeniously devised a game to rescue a friend. We see ourselves in various characters and in the narrator presenting them, identifying with their qualities, dilemmas, habits, and problem-solving skills as they work through fundamental processes of living: maturation, loss, seeking, and moving out of their comfort zones.

From Dory we learn to keep trying (she struggles with her lack of short-term memory) and to seek help in unusual places. When she gets assistance from some apparent enemies such as sharks and a whale, we see that creatures quite different from ourselves may be able to help us do important things, and that, in fact, there is no way to successfully navigate life without help from these surprising sources. From Marlin we learn to listen to and trust others and to lighten up—not to take life so seriously. (He demonstrates his new skill when he’s finally able to tell a joke, like a “real” clownfish.) The principle of taking necessary risks and venturing into new areas is juxtaposed with the necessity and value of a group working together. The film uses aquatic life to affirm that working with others is crucial and that lots of help is available.

Through watching *Finding Nemo*, I am led to examine my inclinations to control or save others or my tendency to hedge myself in lest something bad happen. For Gavin, I hope that adopting multiple perspectives through the eyes of characters creates a pattern of seeing how people with viewpoints he doesn’t agree with arrive at their perspectives, and thus give him a resistance to monocular vision. Practicing seeing other people’s

perspectives without adopting them can generate understanding, which for Gavin might help when another toddler insists on building a tower of blocks in a different way. Reflecting on a film allows us to see our points of resistance to certain kinds of people and consider altering our judgments of them: can I possibly judge a forgetful or annoying neighbor the same way after my experience with Dory?

### The Narrator Guides Us through Film

In addition to offering us a kind of identification with characters, film provides us with a “narrator-in-the-text” who shows us all of the action and all of the characters. This narrator is usually not overtly heard or seen, but rather it is the controlling presence of the filmmaker who tells the story. This narrator creates and interprets the narrative and then leads us through it in a certain way. Nick Browne has discussed the ways that cinematically telling a story connects the spectator to more than the characters within the film’s story. In a 1975 essay, “The Spectator in the Text: The Rhetoric of *Stagecoach*,” Browne analyzes a single scene from John Ford’s 1939 film to demonstrate how the narrator-in-the-text imperceptibly interprets the interaction among characters and the film’s values. The way the story is told also contains interpretation of values, and the viewer is invited by the invisible narrator/director to have certain feelings about and attitudes toward different characters in the film.<sup>7</sup> In *Finding Nemo*, we sympathize with Marlin and find the unspeaking jellyfish to be eerie and dangerous because of the way the invisible narrator has presented them within the story’s values, which in film typically promote the goals of the protagonist. *Finding Nemo*’s narrator walks the fine line of letting me experience fear without being overwhelmed by it. The movie’s makers are trustworthy because they are honest: they are not interested in playing with emotions or tricking viewers or demonstrating how clever they are.

Browne’s model provides a way to talk about film narratives that contain elements or characters that we may not agree with or admire. A simple instance of this is the singing of “Hakuna Matata” by Pumba and Timon in *The Lion King*. Pumba is a warthog and Timon is a meerkat that the young Simba meets after leaving his pride, as he tries to find himself while separated from all that is familiar. His new friends urge him to relax and take life as it comes: “No worries,” they sing, and they demonstrate the pleasures of such a lifestyle. I believe the narrator-in-the-text of *The Lion King* wants us to find their song charming but also to be aware that Timon and Pumba are immature, trying to find their way through the jungle of life. Their philosophy works for them at this point, and they provide

comfort and companionship to the lonely and confused Simba. But the film is not advocating this philosophy as a choice for leading one's life. The narrator-in-the-text does not expect or wish viewers to embrace the attitude permanently and indeed will show us how the three characters in this scene grow and make different choices as the plot unfolds. The narrator of *The Lion King* allows us to enjoy and identify with a philosophy (and characters) that are a part of the movie but certainly not its whole. In *The Lion King*, the protagonist himself is going through stages and at some points makes poor decisions or lacks sufficient information to do the right thing. The narrator-in-the-text holds us at some remove from Simba—we know before he does what his destiny is, that his calling is to remember who he is and return to his home and assume leadership.

Who does *Finding Nemo* ask us to be? Through the narrator, we relate to Marlin's desire to protect his son—a desire intensified by the pain of losing his wife and other children—and are irked by the interference of the absent-minded Dory; to Dory herself, who wants to help but is haunted by her poor memory; to Nemo as he struggles with his "little fin" and anxiety about being on his own; to Crush, the relaxed sea turtle whose trust in his family is a quite different model of parenting; and to Gil, the elder statesman of the aquarium with world-worn weariness and nobility. The narrator sees life steadily and sees it whole, without flinching at the difficult parts. He is not foolishly optimistic, but he has faith in the desire and capacity of individuals to improve themselves. The narrator seamlessly carries us from the sea to the aquarium and dentist's office in Sydney, maintaining the suspense about how the two plotlines will reconnect. The story is told with a sense of its absurdity and a sweet belief that difficult goals certainly are possible, sort of like Dory's resilient faith in her ability to "talk whale" or remember the dentist's address from his swim mask. The characters are flawed but worthy of admiration. A repeated message runs through the film: the need for and difficulty of trusting yourself. It gently insists, "If you're focused on only what you want or what you fear, you'll never see what is possible."

### **Film Can Enlarge Our Souls When We Watch Charitably**

Because of the inherent vicarious experiencing that is intrinsically part of viewing, film includes a strong moral dimension. Films forcefully show values in action and in conflict. Values are portrayed dramatically and subjectively, and we can choose to resist them even as we provisionally accept them for the duration of the film. Because we do contribute to the "making" of the films that we watch, film watching provides opportunities

to understand the nuances of our value-making system and to evaluate the worldviews of the filmmakers and characters.

C. S. Lewis commented on the power of seeing through the eyes of others in his exploration of new ways to approach a literary text, *An Experiment in Criticism*. He asks us to consider what kinds of pleasure texts offer us and how the text itself invites us to approach it. Considering possible benefits of reading (and viewing, by implication), he is interested in how books (films) can open not just the world of literature (film), but also the lives of others—from the interior. Lewis suggests that the act of reading (viewing) is doubly paradoxical: it takes us into and out of ourselves; it may divert us, but it can also be a way we grow: “We seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself. . . . We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own.”<sup>8</sup> Feeling with other hearts is one kind of vicarious experience, one of the ways we may heal ourselves. As we feel with Nemo’s heart when he forgives his father’s overprotectiveness, we may learn to forgive ourselves and others. We feel with Marlin’s heart as he steps back and lets his son take a risk and endanger himself in order to save hundreds of other fish. C. S. Lewis sees the multiplicity of perspectives (experiencing through other eyes, other imaginations, other hearts) as allowing for moving beyond our human limitations, while retaining our distinctly individual identity: “But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. . . . I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here [in reading], as in worship, in love, in moral action and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”<sup>9</sup>

Lewis believes that good reading has something in common with what he calls “affectional or moral or intellectual activity.”<sup>10</sup> These combinations of the emotional, spiritual, and logical in our reading puts a much larger burden on us than if we approach a text with any one of the three. Simply opening ourselves to emotions proffered by any film we feel is “appropriate” is not enough; intellectually analyzing a film, or simply trusting its moral approach (however wholesome it may appear) is not enough. He encourages our responding to the text in the manner or tone the film asks us to and then to evaluate that experience, particularly regarding our share in the creation of meaning. Some of the responsibility for what happens as we view a film thus depends on us; we do not escape ourselves when we enter into the narrative of a book or a movie.

This consideration of the intents of a film’s creators and implications for viewers is echoed in Dean Duncan’s concept of “charitable cinema.”<sup>11</sup>

His approach takes into consideration the inclination of the creators toward the material being filmed and toward the viewers. Such inclinations can increase or diminish the moral dimensions of a particular film; even a cleverly crafted, highly polished film is not generous or helpful to viewers if it is manipulative or mean-spirited—for example, *Finding Nemo* would lose some of its power if it took a mean-spirited, condemning approach to the dentist rather than a charitable one.

Charitable cinema operates for the reception as well as the creation of film. If we approach a work like *Finding Nemo* with contempt or laziness or cynicism, its full moral nature will be inaccessible to us. One way we enhance and control our ethical experiences with film is to reflect on our negative responses or reluctance to engage with a work that has no overt offensive intent.<sup>12</sup> One such experience for me was watching *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, a film about three aboriginal girls. In the film, a white government official, Neville, feels called upon to take care of the girls as he believes is best, but he fails to see his own limitations and rigidity. I hated this arrogant character and found myself being smug in that judgment. Later I reflected on my own tendency to sometimes be self-righteous and impose judgments on others, and I realized that that was the source of my smugness. I was avoiding dealing with my own difficult complexities.

Seeing the acts and choices of others from inside the characters or through a sympathetic narrator's eyes can increase our understanding of the choices of others. Film offers the additional moral dimension of seeing not only the reasons people make certain judgments and choices, but the consequences of these choices (which we may not otherwise have considered).

What are the moral processes and values implied by *Finding Nemo*? How do the makers of *Finding Nemo* extend themselves to me and to Gavin? What do the narrator and the characters encourage us to believe is needful? I feel Gavin and I can trust the film. My need to resist any particular viewpoint or the attitude of its creators is less in this film than in others for several reasons. The behaviors and attitudes enacted in the film avoid the snares of films I see as problematic (particularly the behaviors found in many movies designed for “family” audiences that are in fact vulgar). The varieties of humor in *Finding Nemo* are not crude or mocking; the failings of all characters are acknowledged but not condemned or viewed with an indulgent eye (of the “boys will be boys” school that tolerates certain misbehaviors as inherent in human nature); the sources of conflicts and the nature of virtue are realistically human (ironically, given its cast of aquatic characters); no quick fixes or facile emotional resolutions are offered; the dramatic conflicts are external disasters caused by natural forces.

I would like Gavin to know that life can be difficult for everyone, parents as well as children, sharks as well as clownfish. And that there are ways to negotiate difficulties that are rewarding. *Finding Nemo* seems to fit the worldview Gavin can develop and enacts it without preaching. (I realize that the version of the film that Gavin and I share is phenomenologically different from the precise one experienced by other viewers and that it is dangerous to impose grandiose significance on light entertainment. It would be further revealing if Gavin could have an adult conversation regarding his engagement with the film—but that will have to wait for another time and perhaps another film.)

### Film Expresses Values We Can Accept or Reject

When we view a film, we temporarily enter a space or reality other than our own, a world composed of often differing views and values wherein the viewer must navigate and make value judgments for or against narratives, characters, and their underlying values. Even if I do not agree with the values of a particular film, I still find myself considering them for a two-hour duration, accepting the film's sights (and insights) as I share its world of experience and knowledge.

Recognition of the various kinds of values—and their possible attractiveness to us—is part of the needful reflection on films we experience.

In a discussion of experiencing theater, Rick Duerden of BYU's English Department said, "You are not implicated in what you see."<sup>13</sup> He cites Brigham Young: "It is your duty to study to know everything upon the face of the earth, in addition to reading those books [the scriptures]. We should study not only good, and its effects upon our race, but evil, and its consequences." One available way we've learned to "study not only good, . . . but evil" and the consequences of both is by reading literature and by thinking, talking, and writing about it. Brigham Young continued: "I intend to know the whole of it, both good and bad. Shall I practise evil? No; neither have I told you to practise it, but to learn by the light of truth every principle there is in existence in the world."<sup>14</sup> The analysis of evil is not evil; on the contrary, it is part of the battle against evil. And understanding our own feelings and responses is part of developing healthy attitudes about whatever issues we try to discuss in the light of the gospel.

We can recognize our compliance with the invitation of the implied author or narrator in the text, as Wayne Booth<sup>15</sup> and C. S. Lewis suggest. An additional step is to see but choose to resist the invitations of a film text. African American film theorist Manthia Diawara talks about these possibilities in "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and

Resistance.” He examines the roles of the black viewer in particular and a “resisting spectator” in general. His model can apply to reading a text “against the grain” of the creators’ conscious or unconscious intentions. He argues that a spectator can interpret (or even contradict) the intentions of a film’s creators as revealed by watching the film. (For example, even if the intentions of the filmmakers of *The Lion King* were to promote a philosophy of “no worries,” I would still feel comfortable viewing the film with Gavin, because as viewers we could interpret these intentions in the context of the film, accept or contradict what the filmmakers may be saying, and gain morally from the process.) Diawara is concerned about those who see equivalence between what is on the screen and what the spectator gets from the film.<sup>16</sup>

This type of resistance may be useful for understanding our responses to a film, particularly to one that generates a mixture of responses. We may find ourselves drawn to certain points of view or values expressed in a film, but want to reject (or resist) others. And sometimes a film is particularly important to us spiritually if it allows us to become aware of sticking points—places where we have work to do, but we don’t quite know precisely what the problem (or solution) is.

Watching and thinking about my responses to *Rabbit-Proof Fence* clarified another issue for me. At one point, the government official presents his plan, and I bristle at his unqualified, unquestioned, arrogant tone telling others exactly what is what. He will resort to emotional blackmail because he has to get the “right thing” done, and if in the process he violates the choice-making abilities of a “less evolved” creature, he sees that as certainly justifiable. One thing the film offers me is the chance to be angry with those who restrain people (children, female children in this case) “for their own good.” And my reaction to this character helps me see how I resent the times self-righteous people have stopped me from doing things because they felt I did not know enough. They may have been right, but could they not have extended their prohibitions with kindness and respect? That leads me to consider my own manner and “heart” when I am constrained to “correct” others myself.

Diawara’s account of the resistant spectator suggests important ways to reflect on our responses to film. As spectators watching a text, especially a text with which we have an intense or prolonged relationship, we can understand where a film raises points we can’t otherwise see clearly, if at all. Films may resonate with some important aspect of our development that we are barely aware of. Sometimes our attachment to film goes beyond love of a particular story or character; often the patterning of the film’s structure and stitching together of thematic elements is more appealing



and revealing. Diawara shows that we are not monolithic or single-minded in our engagement with film.<sup>17</sup> While we may recognize the power of an aspect of a film that persuades us to hold a certain view of others, we are also fully capable of refusing to go along with that inclination. Recognizing what the film wants us to do as well as our resistance or inclination to it is key to a greater understanding of ourselves.

In *Finding Nemo*, there does not seem to be any display or message I want to resist; these are characters and values Gavin and I can learn from and model.

### Reflecting on Film Can Be Transformative

For me, a cinematic reflection (or a reflection on cinema) is useful as a regular part of my efforts to understand myself. Consideration of the images we receive and create as we watch allows us to look inward, as well as forward and outward, with an eye of faith. What we “see” in movies registers in our souls and, to a degree, is created by and from our spirit. Film watching means looking at a projected image, but it also means looking at a psychological and spiritual projection of personal truth—or at least of our understanding of the truth. Film transforms our experiences on the level and in the form that can be accessible if we viewers take it seriously and engage it. The process can be transformative in the lives of those who watch, but it requires thoughtful consideration. We need to develop awareness of our individual process of watching and internalizing ideas that may or may not be true. Such reflection requires that we consider how we personally create meanings from film viewing and that we then spend time and energy considering what that creative process means in terms of who we are and who we hope to become. It also means regarding the films that are etched in our memory (perhaps through countless viewings, such as with *Finding Nemo*, or through a particularly poignant single viewing) and what role they may play in the way we perceive ourselves and others.

Understanding how we have (often unconsciously) acquired knowledge through film allows us to intensify the usefulness of the film-viewing experience. We can use film self-reflectively—as part of our consideration of who we are, who we would like to be, and what may be blocking us. Most of us have had the experience of standing in a space between two large mirrors that create a myriad of reflections, where we see ourselves again and again and again. A cinematic reflection may function as a kind of double mirror that replicates us in a manner that lets us see not only what we are but also what we might become. Contemplating our film viewing can give insight into our own behavior; it may be particularly helpful

in allowing us to see dimensions of ourselves that we rarely see, just as one sees the back of one's head in the mirror.

Thinking about a film that stays with me in some way is a means of understanding something that I sense is important but that I cannot quite yet "see." Such a process is a sort of reframing of an experience that I marked as meaningful at the time but did not grasp the significance of. Looking later, from a distance, at the encounter I had with the film lets the most relevant features emerge. Sometimes the relevant features are about what I need to do myself; sometimes they are about the needs and motives of other people I'm dealing with, professionally and personally. At first glance, for me, *Finding Nemo* is about the importance of a parent letting go of a child. But I came to realize that the further message is to find a way to stay connected to the independent person who is my offspring. On the surface, Nemo wants to find his way back home to the coral reef. But paralleling that, on a deeper level, he wants to be respected and trusted by his father and function autonomously, trusting himself.

There are other points that I "see" when the film gently mirrors and mocks some aspects of my nature I would like to change. There is a fish so obsessed with bubbles he can think of nothing else when they appear and a cleaning shrimp who withdraws from all around him unless there is a specific task available that he can do well. He emerges only to do his task—never for anything else. A long-spined porcupine fish who inflates when he feels the slightest bit of fear or anger lets me see clearly how those emotions may prevent someone from taking any action at all. Even the sharks who are struggling (mostly unsuccessfully) with their addiction to eating fish let me recognize and even laugh at the struggle to resist eating things I know are not good for me. I did not consciously register these meanings until after several viewings; these meanings emerged (perhaps uniquely for me) because of the areas of concern I already had about my inner life and outward actions.

## Conclusion

Because we do contribute to the "making" of the films that we watch, film watching provides opportunities to understand the nuances of our value-making system and to evaluate the values of the filmmakers and characters. Reflecting on film can work in conjunction with other spiritual efforts, helping us see how God can operate in our lives and helping us better understand other people's motives and possible reasons behind their actions and words. Reflection and discussion can help us understand what films mean to others and which values they attach. Reflection can help us

identify which factors are shaping our negative responses to certain people and experiences. This reflection is intimately related to our spiritual growth.

Our regular practices of reading scriptures, pondering them, and thinking about how they relate to our everyday life can apply to other experiences, if we reflect on them. Joseph F. Smith described the circumstances in which he received a revelation on life after death. "I sat in my room pondering over the scriptures; and reflecting upon the great atoning sacrifice. . . . As I pondered over these things which are written, the eyes of my understanding were opened" (D&C 138:1, 11). Pondering the results of our film viewing can become part of our seeking truth; it can be a tool to add to those understandings by which we grow. While film does not have the intensity of truth found in the scriptures, it can offer us help in "laying the foundation of a great work" in our spiritual development: "out of small things proceedeth that which is great" (D&C 64:33). Faith can operate as effectively when we contemplate some films as when we consider words from the best books.

When we ponder film in retrospect, we see all of its multiple levels: intellectually (rationally), emotionally, and spiritually. The "text" each of us creates in watching a film is unique to us: no one else adds the particular feelings, ideas, and spiritual nuances that arise from our distinctive life experiences. And if we view the same film again, we create a different text, in that our perceptions are colored by the prior viewing. Even if I were to watch *Finding Nemo* without my grandson, my experience of it, although new, would be influenced by the many times we have watched it together.

One complication of bringing film into consideration is that film, like much religious experience, is ineffable, difficult to put clearly into words; its visual storytelling form engages us in nonverbal ways. Our ponderings are also very private, intimately tied to the core of our eternal identities, so they are hard to articulate and difficult to share. We make ourselves vulnerable by focusing on our own memories of film viewing. Often we are drawn toward specific aspects or kinds of film because something in them attracts us or, even more importantly, because something there may trouble us. Reflecting about these films' relation to our inner lives may be very useful in our struggles to know ourselves, but it is also extremely difficult to do.

The film experience is not restricted to the theater but continues on as we reflect and internalize and use what the film has given us the opportunity to experience. We bring it out from the darkened room into the light of our daily lives.

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1. On film's spiritual potential, see Paul Schrader, *The Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (New York: De Capo, 1972).

2. Thomas J. Lefler and Gideon O. Burton, "Toward a Mormon Cinematic Aesthetic: Film Styles in *Legacy*," in this issue, *BYU Studies* 46, no. 2 (2007): 274–304. See also Thomas J. Lefler, "In Search of a Transcendental Film Style: The Cinematic Art Form and the Mormon Motion Picture" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1997).

3. Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*.

4. Film scholar Dudley Andrew is interested in how meaning is made while someone views a film. He calls it "reason on the run," because the meanings (reason) of the film emerge only in the action of perceiving. Andrew reconsiders the role the spectator plays in construction of meaning. He develops a nonrational, experiential approach that urges attending to connections between viewers' "real lives" and the films they watch, rather than only logical, scholarly analysis: "Life itself tells us that experience is dearer and more trustworthy than schemes by which we seek to know and change it." He values the way a viewer's co-creating of a film moves the experience off the screen or outside a detached intellectual analysis and into our lives. Dudley Andrew, "Phenomenology: The Neglected Tradition" (1978), in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 628–31.

5. Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 28. Sobchack is interested in the operation of a certain kind of "vision"—of how as spectators our eye "addresses" the film and the eyes of characters within the film's narrative diegesis (fictional world), and how film creators share their vision and their perceptions with others through the film's narrative presentation. She uses Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology to propose ways of seeing both film and our experiences differently: "The radical reflection of phenomenology attempts to *reanimate* the taken-for-granted and the institutionally sedimented" (28).

6. Sobchack, *Address of the Eye*, 10–11.

7. Nick Browne, "The Spectator in the Text: The Rhetoric of *Stagecoach*," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 118–34. Browne's argument is that the creator(s) of the text uses "presentational structures" or spatial/temporal structures (such as camera angle, lighting, music, composition and art direction, acting, editing, plot, and dialogue) to create a position (within the text) from which the spectator views the action and understands the themes of the film. The narrator (director John Ford, in the specific case Browne analyzes) compels the spectator to join him in a certain relationship not only to characters but also to the main beliefs (moral order) of the narrative.

8. C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 137.

9. Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism*, 141.

10. Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism*, 138.

11. Dean Duncan, lecture notes in possession of the author.

12. Nick Browne's "narrator-in-the-text" charitable cinema echoes the view of Wayne Booth as articulated in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Booth's exploration of how reading (and reflecting on our reading) is ethical is closely allied to the role of active spectator and implied narrator. He identifies the kinds of "implied authors" that guide us, describing their attitudes toward us, as well as toward the people in their narratives. He believes that the relationship the narrator-in-the-text has with us is as important as the theme or the values of the characters within the story the narrator tells. The author's "disposition" is revealed by the kind of fictional world he creates and how he leads us through it, as well as the characters who share their experiences. "Its time takes over our time. And we are occupied in the sense of being taken over, colonized: occupied by a foreign imaginary world." There are benefits as well as dangers to sharing a fictional world and its values. Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 139.

13. Rick Duerden, "How to Experience the Theater as a Student of Theater," 1, copy of manuscript in possession of the author.

14. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 2:93–94, February 6, 1853.

15. Booth, *Company We Keep*.

16. Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 893, 898–900. Diawara feels resistant spectatorship can help generate different kinds of film as well as different types of viewing in relationship to depiction of people and cultures on screen. In addition to withstanding the images or values presented, he says, "Resisting spectators are transforming the problem of passive identification into active criticism which both informs and interrelates with contemporary oppositional film-making." He believes independent black productions have "sharpened the Afro-American spectator's critical attitude towards Hollywood films" (900). This calls attention to the importance (and sometimes, the difficulty) of our role as "active" viewers and the issue of the currently emerging Mormon film movement.

17. Diawara, "Black Spectatorship," 900.